

"Finding Your Fit" (Santa Monica Magazine, July 2004)

When my teenage self wanted to get in shape, they told me the quickest way would be to join the Army. They may have been right. Who knows. But at this age of no return, I opt for the next best thing. I've joined the Army fitness trainer Sonki Hong, who conducts daily boot camp sessions for civilians at various outdoor locations. Cadets at Camp Sonki range from adolescent to senior. Like many others, I'm right in the middle. There are three daily sessions, two in the morning and one in the evening. Although I was never an early bird, I've found that morning workouts give me energy to get through the day, so I opt for the first class at 0630 and the reveille that it requires.

Before my first session, I learned that Captain Hong had been a master fitness trainer for the U.S. Army, and had graduated at the top of his class from West Point in fitness ranking and had years of martial arts training. So I expected the most brutal of leadership styles, a steely voice and eyes drilling through the morning fog. But my perception couldn't have been further from reality. Sonki is at once disarming, coy even. Never has the negative escaped his lips. He's the type that, when you arrive, greets you personally with a warm smile. And then he kills you.

All exercises take place outdoors and without any equipment, except for resistance bands. There is a lot of running involved. And jumping. And stretching. And kicking. The next day is a completely different circuit, to give those sore parts a chance to recover. You learn to do these things on your own for the rest of your life. But the guidance and camaraderie that comes with these spiritual sunup and sundown sessions, is what has 75% of all students returning after the initial five-week course.

Everyone has physical limitations and this is where those limitations are met, and then bulldozed aside. I came to Sonki in physical condition just slightly above average for a healthy man my age. Five weeks later I feel, that if I had ever been in this good of shape before, I don't remember when that was or how it felt. When the initial pain subsided, I became Kevin Spacey's character in American Beauty, feeling as though something had awakened inside of me, that stuck parts had come free. Though I had never experienced a full-on midlife crisis, I realize, comparing my new body with the one I had in January, why I was supposed to have. Close call, I guess.